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SHORT COMMUNICATIONS

NOTES ON SOME BIRDS OF OL ARI NYIRO, LAIKIPIA PLATEAU

During the period 28 April to 11 May 1985, while conducting research on honeyguides Indicatoridae on Ol Ari Nyiro (Laikipia) Ranch in Central Kenya we observed, and in some cases recorded voices of, birds that are noteworthy in terms of avian distributions or particular behaviour patterns we have not seen reported before. Most of the species mentioned below were observed, and some ringed in the upper Mukutan Gorge, the Mukutan being a stream draining westwards from the Laikipia Plateau through a narrow gorge, then opening out towards Lake Baringo. The study site in the Mukutan is at 0:36N, 36:22E at an elevation of 1740 m. The habitat consists of narrow riparian woodland mainly of fever trees *Acacia xanthophloea* and rocky surrounding hills bearing mixed leleshwa *Tarchonanthus camphoratus*, acacias, and *Combretum* spp. During April and May the ranch was experiencing its heaviest 'long' rains in a decade.

Four-banded Sandgrouse *Pterocles quadricinctus*

A pair stood closely in front of our vehicle, and then at its side for 10 min, within 7 m of us on 4 May. This was at 18:30 in leleshwa-acacia bushland on a rocky slope. This is considerably east of prior reports, the nearest of which (Britton 1980) is at "the Kerio Valley".

Cuckoos

During early May seven species were singing, five of which were reasonably common. In order of abundance based on vocal activity (which of course may underestimate numbers of those species just beginning to sing) these were the Red-chested *Cuculus solitarius*, Black *C. clamorus*, Didric *Chrysococcyx caprius*, Black and White *Clamator jacobinus*, Klaas' *Chrysococcyx klaas*, Levaillant's *Clamator leivaillanti*, and Emerald *Chrysococcyx cupreus*. All species ranged through diverse habitats we encountered, except that the only singing Emerald Cuckoo was in the riverine woods.

Silvery-cheeked Hornbill Bycanistes brevis

One brayed in the gorge near our site on 10 May; the bird, atop a fever tree, bowing deeply and cocking its tail, faced to the south-west whence came answering cries at half a kilometre in that direction. This appears to be the most northerly occurrence of this large hornbill, known from the higher areas around Nyaharuru regularly north to Ngelesha, where some highland forest remains (C. Francombe pers. comm.).

Hemprich's Hornbill Tockus hemprichii

This species of the Baringo area has been reported to us previously from the Mukutan by Colin Francombe, but we had never seen them there until 10 May, when we followed a foraging pair (that must have wandered east up the Mukutan) to about $1\frac{1}{2}$ km south of our site, at 1770 m, where they disappeared from view in fever trees to the south. This represents a high altitudinal occurrence as well as an eastern extension of its range. The gorge's rocky walls would seem ideal for this species, but it most likely normally occupies the lower gorges to the west. They must thus wander in search of fruits when not breeding. Britton (1980) notes a record from Nakuru at 1800 m, but states its altitudinal range as 950-1300 m. It is apt to occur regularly along the rocky west Laikipia scarp up to 1500 m or even, as in this instance, higher.

Pallid Honeyguide Indicator meliphilus

It occurred regularly at our honeyguide study site in the Mukutan, in numbers smaller than the Scaly-throated *I. variegatus*, Black-throated *I. indicator* and Lesser *I. minor* that regularly feed on our honeycomb feeders. One colour-ringed on 11 May weighed 14.4 g and had a wing length of 74 mm.

Wahlberg's Honeybird (Brown-backed Honeybird) *Prodotiscus regulus* Playback of its song, a short monotonous trill reminiscent of the more strident, longer song of the Scaly-throated Honeyguide, elicited a few songs by one bird and repeated approach and searching behaviour by a second bird on 11 May. The song for playback was from Len Gillard's cassettes *Southern African bird calls*. The bird attracted closely to us did not call, but held its crown feathers erect, and occasionally flashed its white flank marks in flight to us. The English name of this bird in brackets is that used by us in the forthcoming *Birds of Africa* Volume III; its brown back distinguishes it very well from the Eastern Green-backed Honeybird (the Eastern Honeybird of Britton 1980) *P. zambesiae*, and these names, used in Zambia and elsewhere, are far more appropriate and helpful for identification than are those of *Birds of East Africa*; these names followed those used by Forbes-Watson (1977) although it is worth noting that Forbes-Watson was dissatisfied with some of them himself.

Like other *Prodotiscus*, this species does not feed at bee-hives, but obtains wax from the scale-insects it eats. We never saw it at our makeshift hive, although it once sang from a fever tree overhead.

Black Rough-wing (Black Sawwing Swallow) *Psalidoprocne pristoptera*
Although reported by Brown & Britton (1980) as usually not nesting in stream banks, we regularly saw two birds of a party (frequently numbering five or six) enter and leave a hole excavated 3 m up a steep bank in a bend of the Mukutan stream from 1-11 May. The marks of their feet on the base of the entrance hole were clearly visible. Two flood situations during our stay brought the water level up to within a metre below the nest, but they continued using it. We did not attempt to ascertain its contents. The birds were highly vocal and we obtained numerous recordings of their weak calls. We prefer the appropriate name 'sawwing' used further south in Africa, for these birds because 'rough-wing' (Britton 1980) is a long-used name for a genus (*Stelgidopteryx*) of American swallows.

Violet-backed Starling *Cinnyricinclus leucogaster*

These starlings were numerous in pairs and small groups of up to eight, and obviously were nesting between 28 April-11 May. Our assistant, Dikson Chepus, told us of the habit of these starlings of incorporating elephant dung into their nests. Once apprised of this, we began to look at pairs, and on 10 and 11 May we observed three separate incidents of Violet-backed Starlings, in each case a male, plucking, balling and carrying off 1.5-2.0-cm balls of elephant dung. In one case the dung was fresh, and in the other cases it was old, but rains had rendered them equivalent to fresh dung for the birds' purposes. We could not take time to seek the nests, but watched two males fly toward distant dead trees. One male gathered the dung along a track in front of us, as its presumed mate fed on the track. When the male flew with the dung, the female probed for insects a few more times, then flew after the male. On 11 May a pair flew above us in the Mukutan, the male bearing a wad of elephant dung in his bill. The male, carrying the dung and followed by the female, attempted to enter a cavity in a fever tree over our hide; this hole had been investigated for several days by a singing male Yellow-spotted Petronia *Petronia pyrgita*. The petronia appeared and vigorously chased the starlings to a fever tree 50 m to the north, calling constantly. For over 10 min the petronia chased them, especially the male starling, about that tree, and it once intercepted the male starling, and drove it off when it again flew toward the cavity-bearing tree. During all this time the male starling held the dung in its bill, and as far as we could see it still held the dung when the two starlings finally flew away to the east.

Stripe-breasted Seed-eater *Serinus reichardi*

This little-known seed-eater extends its range in drier areas across the Laikipia Plateau east to Don Dol (*fide* D. Turner), but we had not seen it in previous visits to Ol Ari Nyiro. From 3-11 May a singing male accompanied by a female was about our site in the Mukutan. The male employed the tops of certain acacias, including fever trees, as singing perches. These song perches covered an area of some 400 m x 200 m. We recorded the very varied song, which employs much mimicry; we noted mimicry involving such calls

and songs as those of white-eyes *Zosterops* spp., Cardinal Woodpecker *Dendropicos fuscescens*, White-browed Robin Chat *Cossypha heuglini*, Collared Sunbird *Anthreptes collaris*, Black Cuckoo Shrike *Campephaga flava* and others. They were likely breeding.

Somali Golden-breasted Bunting *Emberiza poliopleura*

We flushed three buntings from along a track in degraded *Acacia gerrardii* woodland at 1830 m on 3 May. One disappeared before we could observe it, but the other two, a male and female of this species, perched alongside our vehicle. We clearly saw the white-patterned wings and patterned greyish streaky back with the grey rump of this bunting. We can only assume that these birds wandered upland to the south and west of their normal, lower, dryer range (Britton 1980 gives 1200 m as the altitudinal maximum). This may be a reflection of generally more arid conditions in the Laikipia region, although the May rains were unusually heavy (only some 255 mm of rain, a 30-year low, fell on the main portion of the ranch in all of 1984).

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DESERT WHEATEAR *OENANTHE DESERTI* IN KENYA

On 17 February 1984 I had to fly to Kiunga (1:45S, 41:29E), north Kenya coast some 10 km SW of the Somali border, in the course of my job. The suddenness of my departure prevented me from taking binoculars. My time on the ground was restricted to the airstrip and adjacent hospital. The habitat was open, as befits an airstrip, with low sparse bush mostly under a metre high. Several Pied and Isabelline Wheatears (*Oenanthe pleschanka* and *O. isabellina*) were present and they, together with the Northern Wheatear *O. oenanthe* are white-rumped wheatears with which I am very familiar.